

DIVINATION

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It is easy enough for the diviner to guess the status and background of his clients, and hence their likely interests, even if they are strangers to him. For dress and general behaviour reveal a good deal in Nupe; and the questions put to a diviner are usually sufficiently specific to give him such clues as he may need. Well-known personages, incidentally, such as members of the high nobility, never consult a diviner in person; they send messengers who are not supposed to divulge the names of their employers. But these messengers are usually servants or retainers of the nobleman in question, and as well known as he. 787

Generally speaking, the Nupe diviner tends to be optimistic; if some trouble is forecast, the suggestion of a ready remedy or some warning easily observed would accompany the prophecy. I have, in fact, not met with any prophecy which was outright disastrous. Nor is the Nupe diviner given to cryptic statements; ambiguous though his technical vocabulary may be, his communications to clients are clear and straightforward. Occasionally he makes use of symbolic allusions, which are, however, readily understood; thus the mention of 'dark' or 'black' things means that the prospect is bleak or frightening; 'white' means luck and good prospects, while 'red' indicates wealth, ampleness, prosperity. [822]

In order to gain a clear picture of the variety of problems on which diviners are usually consulted, I employed a crude statistical technique. I supplied four diviners with sheets of paper on which I drew rough pictures representing certain expected topics and instructed them to mark, underneath, their visitors, day by day for one month—a stroke for a man and a circle for a woman. Cross-strokes were meant to indicate repeated visits, while space was left for additional topics. It must be noted that all four men had a high reputation in their locality so that the size of their clientele, which proved to differ widely, did not reflect their unequal renown. Rather surprisingly, the largest and most regular clientele was that of a diviner in Bida, where I should have expected the competition of sand-divining to have spoiled the market for the pagan variety. The next best clientele was that of a diviner in Saci, a small hamlet near Bida, while the custom of two diviners in the heart of the country, in Kutigi and Jebba, was markedly smaller. The season of the year, incidentally, did not seem to affect the diviner's business.

The Bida diviner had thirty-seven male and twelve female visitors in a month (in March); of these five men had come twice, and one man three times. The diviner knew personally only one of his clients, who was his brother-in-law and came from Doko. The diviner in Saci was consulted twenty-eight times by men and twice by women (in January); three men had come twice, four men

*1796 the freshly cut grain eaten in certain sacrifices points to subsistence
 182 and the continuation of fertility which the ritual is meant to secure. The meaning of all these symbols is fairly obvious and in a sense 'natural', being based on a commonly known nexus between the sign and the thing signified. Symbols of a more artificial kind, resting on some specific and perhaps esoteric convention, are rare in Nupe ritual. The only clear instance is the symbolism of right and left in the *dzakó*, which, as I have said, has no parallel in any other Nupe cult. The sacrifice of fish in one version of the *gunnu* is a more doubtful case; for though fish are associated with fertility (in dream interpretation) and welcome gifts (in divining), that knowledge is far from general. The use of tortoise shells in the same ceremonial reminds the congregation of the Father Tortoise stories, but does no more. The rule that the *Ndazo* must not wear anything 'tied round his waist' evokes no association, say, with constraint inimical to growth and fertility. And though it may be tempting to speculate on the rule of calling the sacrificial beer 'water', that is, by the name of the fluid which (as rain or semen) is linked with the fertility of nature and man, the Nupe attach no ulterior meaning to this metaphor.

*1796 Whether these and other details of the ritual procedure do not
 182 perhaps involve symbolisms of a more subtle and unconscious nature, I will not discuss. In my view uncomprehended 'symbols'
 782 have no part in social enquiry; their social effectiveness lies in their capacity to indicate, and if they indicate nothing to the actors, they are, from our point of view, irrelevant and indeed no longer symbols (whatever their significance for the psychologist or psycho-analyst). But let us note that certain modes of acting may be significant for the actors without constituting symbols, merely because they represent a rule, a formalism of acting, that is, a *ritual*, and not accidental or random behaviour. This is true, for example, of the choice of the sacrificial animals. To begin with, they are in every case 'ordinary' animals, without sacred associations and neither rare nor avoided in workaday life. Though most rituals prescribe the sex of the sacrificial beast, males and females are chosen in random manner, suggestive of no symbolic link with the purpose of the ritual. The *ketsá* is perhaps the clearest example; the legend, as we remember, mentions the sacrifice of a cow; yet the actual ritual, when performed at the request of the Kede chief, requires the killing of a bull. In other rituals the sex as well as the species of the animal simply depend on the outcome of divination. It might seem that at least the specification of white or black animals, which is fairly common, must have a symbolic significance since black colour is generally associated with secrecy and evil things, and white colour with

prosperity.